

Freetown Diary 2003

Keith D Thomson

Nov 17th:

Arrived safely at 1830 on the Sierra National Airlines (only) plane run by Icelandair with platinum blond stewardesses, and a sign in the toilets saying smoking could result in 5 years jail! Survived helicopter ride to Mammy Yoko hotel where we were met by Nigel Hyde of Mission Challenge and taken via a badly needed beer at Alex's bar to the *Anastasis* which had docked a few hours earlier.

Nov 18th:

Spent the morning in the 'OR' checking the new (2nd hand) anaesthetic machines and also filling out of date penicillin bottles with water to stop them exploding during incineration. Afternoon walked into town to get local SIM card for phone. Very heavy rain storm, got soaked but at least it is warm out here! Thought: '*At least we could go back to the ship for a hot shower and clean dry clothes – all the poor people living on the street would have no such luxury.*' Also saw blind man being guided by young boy – difficult when there are so many potholes in the pavement and deep drainage ditches alongside.

Nov 19th:

Visit to football stadium where screening (selection) of patients for surgery will be held next week. Good venue, which was apparently used last year. On return to the *Anastasis* met up with Simeon Sesay whom I first met in Guinea in 1998. He is constructing a school and trying to set up an income generating agricultural project at Mapainda, about 3 hours drive from Freetown. He needs another GBP 2000 to finish the project. I got him to itemise costs of each bit – will try and raise him some money when I return to UK.

Nov 20th:

Visited 5 groups of people handicapped with polio. During the past decade of conflict in Sierra Leone the polio vaccination programme ground to a halt with disastrous consequences, for thousands of people mainly children. 'New Steps' the Mercy Ships' permanent land-based group has been setting up micro-enterprise projects to encourage these groups to fund themselves: wood work, metal work(including carving metal *objets d'art* out of old shell cases (c.f. biblical '*swords into ploughshares.*'), Tye dyeing and needle work.. New Steps also provides made to measure orthotic leg braces, wheel chairs and helps fund, with the assistance of UNICEF, some polio children to attend 'normal' schools.

Nov. 21st:

Went for 6 am jog round the docks. Joined 'Mission Challenge Team' from the UK painting a Leonard Cheshire Home and School. Did about 4 hours continuous painting which was tiring but very worth while. Mission Challenge brings groups of British people to West Africa for 10 days during which time they participate in a construction project, visit the *Anastasis* on several occasions and generally see what a Third World Developing country is all about. The groups are staying in rented accommodation with an excellent view of an African market. In the evening went with the Mission challenge team and friend Gary Graham to an 'in the middle of nowhere area called Hastings' to show a 2hr video about Jesus of Nazareth (St Luke's gospel version) We were equipped with a screen tied to the open back doors of the bus, a video, projector and a petrol generator which had to be closely guarded! About 350 people seemed to emerge from nowhere out of the darkness to watch.

Nov 22nd:

Went to Alex's bar to watch the World Rugby Cup final on a RSA satellite station. Great Game! Then met up with Simon Heslop my goddaughter Hazel's husband who is a British soldier working for IMATT (International Military Training Advisory Team). We drove with him to an excellent beach I remembered from 2001. The beach bar there was still run by Joseph Samsu. When I tapped him on the shoulder and said '*hello Joseph*' he immediately replied '*a pleasure to see you again Dr Keith*' – not a bad memory from two years ago!

The water was incredibly warm, the fresh barracuda kebabs were excellent – we ran into a serious traffic jam in Freetown on the way back to the Port but Simon is already an expert at African driving in spite of only being in the country for about 4 weeks! Passing the roundabout near Congo Cross he pointed to a portion of nearby wall reduced to rubble about 10 days before when an army three 'tonner' had crashed into a school playground when its brakes failed because soap and water had been used instead of brake fluid. Four Sierra Leonean soldiers died and others were injured in this tragedy. A mechanic was sacked.

Luckily our ship does not now have to move offshore for 4 days in favour of the British frigate *HMS Glasgow* – the '*Ship of Hope and Healing*' not now being replaced by the '*Ship of War*'!

Nov 23rd (Sunday):

This morning walked to St George's Cathedral near the 'Cotton Tree' in the centre of town. Traditional Anglican Choral Communion with everyone very smartly dressed in contrast to the extreme poverty manifesting itself on the road outside. The choir were excellent. We were asked to sign the guest book which included the signatures of Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and his wife Jane in July 2003 and also that of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip on Nov 26th 1961.

On the way back three of us went to the local Victoria market, where we bumped into a woman who had a 10-month-old baby called 'Nancy', named after the American nurse who was with us. Our appearance prompted the chant of 'Nancy Nancy!' Such was her popularity during a visit to Freetown the previous year. While we were in the market the remaining group of about 10 went back via another route. My wife Fiona unfortunately had unknowingly had the pocket of her Platypus water bottle carrier slashed open – luckily they only stole the contents – suntan lotion and a small fan.

2nd WEEK

Nov 24th:

AM: sorted out Anaesthesia machines – difficulties with scavenging so took photo and Emailed to USA for advice. PM visited Italian 'Emergency Hospital' in Godrich which provides general surgery and orthopaedics for the local people. Two Italian surgeons worked there, one of which was a younger version of Pavarotti!

Two operating theatres but old equipment. Patient treatment was free. Two European nurses and 40 Sierra Leoneans. No Morphine or Pethidine for post-op pain relief just tramadol – main anaesthetic technique was ketamine by infusion; a litre bag of Ringers lactate solution containing a gram of ketamine was always ready in the operating theatre. On the wall was a printed infusion regime – a legacy to the excellent work done by consultant anaesthetist Dr Eric Vrede, who spent nearly two years in Freetown training local anaesthetic nurses. All I met spoke very highly of him.

Nov 25th:

Visited Connaught Hospital in the middle of Freetown. Theatres were filthy, advertised prices on the walls were high. Ancient anaesthetic machine. In the afternoon I went to the market again – travelled both ways by Puda Puda, the local minivan taxis – Lady Jean McColl, one of our group of 5 was rather amused by it all – we had 21 people in the vehicle for the return journey but it only cost less than 10p each!

Nov 26th:

Started the 'Computers for Africa' Project. We have 92 Pentium 1 and 2 computers which were put on the ship in Sunderland for Sierra Leone schools. Included in the package was Cliff Hunter (age 23) from Edinburgh currently working in the IT Department on the *Anastasis*. We visited two possible recipient sites and assessed them for accommodation, electrical supply, security and willingness to let other groups use them.

The first was a church run by Moses Sesay which fulfilled all the criteria. It even had mains electricity and two generators as well as a landline for email. (Most phones in Freetown are cellular.) He had several university IT lecturers in his congregation. He had plans to also use the computers to create an Internet Café to income generate. We then visited a Leonard Cheshire Home for polio victims, mainly children. Polio has become a terrible problem during the past 10 years as a result of the civil war preventing the vaccination programme. There was a newly built training centre with two rooms already designated for computers. Though only one power socket in each room but good security including 24 hour guards. Returning from the town centre after getting Cliff a SIM card for his mobile the fan belt in the Land Rover went but we made it back to the ship – just!

Heard a remarkable story from Dr Tom, an American eye surgeon who has joined the *Anastasis* for the first time: he was outside the Port, examining a child with an eye problem in front of the nearby Children's Hospital while being filmed by the BBC team when a man came up to him and said 'Look at this hospital, they won't take your child in unless you pay 50,000 leones (about \$20), even if it is very ill. But actually even if you do have the money the treatment is no good and it will probably still die!' Then apparently there was a wailing noise and a corpse was brought out on a stretcher and piled in the back of a hatch back vehicle!

Welcome to the current state of medical care for about 99% of the population in Sierra Leone – in the 21st Century!!

Nov 27th:

The first day of 'Screening' – (selection of patients for surgery on board the Ship). This had been organised like an army campaign. The first Mercy Ships Group left at 0430 for the venue which was the National Football Stadium. Already there was a queue of about 2000 many of whom had slept on the pavement overnight such was their desperation to be seen, free of charge, by a doctor trained to Western Standards.

The patients were pre-screened by experienced nursing staff outside the gates and a certain number were then allowed in where they were divided into 4 queues to see the different surgeons: maxillo-facial, ophthalmic, orthopaedic and general (goitres and inguinal hernias – seen by Lord McColl). I and two other anaesthetists had one of the least stressful roles: doing pre-op examinations on happy patients who had already been scheduled for surgery.

My nursing friend Nancy was very upset at lunchtime because she had had spent several hours counselling and praying for the 'noes' – people, who had often travelled a long way at great personal financial sacrifice and queued all night and all day to be told we could not help them. My mood lifted when I bumped into Patrick Coker a walking success story and testament to some of the remarkable surgery performed on board the 'Great White Ship of Hope.'

In 1993 Patrick had a huge tumour removed by Gary Parker from his lower jaw (mandible). Ten years later he has a big warm smile and looked amazingly normal, he was working for Mercy Ships as a translator. He told me he was now married with four children and worked as a pastor.

One 17-year-old girl came with a severely infected R eye socket – apparently the eye had been damaged and removed some years before but she had fallen and managed to push a pencil deep into the socket: she was drowsy, unable to walk and had clinical signs of meningitis. Luckily we had a couple of vials of one of the latest broad spectrum antibiotics (cephtriaxone) so we started treatment and when she returned the next morning she was more alert and able to walk and after two litres of IV fluid, improved further: she will be seen in the docks for the next few days.

Corinna, one of the BBC team was apparently seen in tears after Dr Tony said he was unable to operate on a woman with a huge fungating facial tumour. I saw some of the largest inguinal hernias I have ever seen – almost down to the knees in a couple of cases: the men with these large ones always wore very baggy trousers!

There were scores of ladies with big goitres (I only saw one man with this problem in two days) – we could only schedule the unilateral ones (one sided) as to remove all the thyroid can cause myxoedema. They do not have any thyroxine out here and certainly cannot afford it!

After leaving the Ship at 0715, I eventually got back about 2015 .

Nov 28th:

More memorable cases including a 50-year-man who had broken both of his upper arms (*humeri*) in a car crash a year ago but the fractures had not mended at all! Another man had a fixed flexion deformity of his wrist with his hand stuck at right angles to his forearm. Fiona played a vital role as an escort to patients taking them from one 'station' to another in the highly organised scheme of things. At one time she accompanied 'Tash' the young black BBC presenter who had flown in the day before and whose reaction to events was part of the BBC's filming for the day.

Had a long chat with Yabom, one of our translators who was also a trained midwife (18 months after nursing qualification) working at the PCMH (Princess Christian Maternity Hospital). She explained that the Maternal Mortality in Sierra Leone was so high because the untrained TBAs – ('Traditional Birth Attendants' – older ladies in the community who were often unable to read or write) referred the patients to the hospital far too late. The main causes of death were: Haemorrhage, Eclampsia, Obstructed labour, Anaemia, Infection and Poverty (unable to afford any treatment, at least the TBAs did not charge!).

Costs were: 40,000 leones for normal delivery then 1000 per day for the bed and 5000 extra for an IV infusion which had to be purchased by the relatives at the pharmacy. Cost of Caesarean section was about 100,000 leones (1GBP = 4000 leones but average annual *per capita* income in the country is about £100 making it the poorest country in the World according to a UN index).

During the afternoon I was phoned by Yvonne Thompson, the headmistress of the Lebanese International School – probably the best school in Freetown if not Sierra Leone. She collected me from the stadium for a brief visit. The school was amazing, a sort of modern Western backwater of tranquillity in the middle of such an impoverished community. It had tennis and basketball courts, modern air-conditioned classrooms including two computer rooms each equipped with ten Pentium 3 desktops! (No Computer donations for them!) The pupils do London 'A' levels and was the place where Jenneh Kpakwa, the girl we had staying from 1997-99 was educated. There were 800 pupils about 60% of whom were Lebanese; the annual cost was \$1000 per pupil.

Anyhow – back to the screening which ended at about 1800 remarkably peaceably. *Next time you want to moan about the NHS, just stop for a second and try and imagine what it is like for the millions of people in*

the World like those in Sierra Leone who have for all intents and purposes no healthcare at all: few properly trained doctors and nurses, virtually no medicines and certainly absolutely no treatment if you have no money.

Returned to the ship rather knackered but relieved all had gone well and there had been no riots which sometimes happen out of desperation especially when the lists are full and the gates are closed. Had supper and watched the video of 'Shadowlands' with friends.

Nov.29th:

Went with our friends Deidre and Gary Graham (Gary who survived a cardiac arrest on board in Feb this year!) to River no. 2 beach – spectacular scenery, wonderful warm water and amazing fresh crabs for lunch which had relatively small bodies but huge claws! Bumped into my army friend Simon and the 'lads' having a barbecue – good to know British tax payers money is being used well!! Both the drive out and back were quite challenging for Gary's driving: a lot of traffic in the way and terrible terrain on the way back over Gary's (short cut!?) cross-country route!

Nov.30th:

Travelled to church in Lumley (JEES Ministry) with Fiona and anaesthetic colleague John. Pastor Leslie collected us from the ship and we went by Puda Puda and then taxi – about 45 min travel in total but cost about 25p each! Church service was VERY loud and we had to resort to putting bits of paper tissues in our ears – this had to be quickly removed when we were asked to come up to the front and help bless the visiting Pastor (post loud shouting sermon) who was kneeling on the floor!

After the 3 hour service (normal duration in West Africa) we went to Pastor Leslie's mum's house which was nearby and participated in the naming ceremony for his sister's new baby; one-week-old Ruth. His sister had travelled back from the Gambia for the birth because she felt Sierra Leone had better Maternity services! I also met Leslie's 11-month-old son who is called 'baby Keith!' A team from the ship in a vehicle then picked us up from there and we went on to Hamilton beach for lunch and a swim – unfortunately the water was very dirty: a ship had probably dumped its waste overboard or refuse for the city had caught an onshore current.

Dec 1st:

Surgery has at last started in two of the three operating rooms. One of the challenges was to try and sort out the problem of Sevoflurane bottles that will not attach to the modern filling device on the vaporisers. The Sevo was supplied by Abbott but made in Japan!

The scavenging and recycling the exhaust from the capnographs has been solved.

Went to the market late afternoon with Mary and Joanne as their chaperone. Travelled there by Puda Puda (managed to pay only African prices and walked back). Bought some cloth and I purchased a magnificent Water Buffalo in Ebony to add to my son Duncan's collection.

Dec 2nd:

At the 0730 community meeting the new Executive Director, Dazlin Small really showed what she was made of. She handled a difficult problem very well. Morning surgery went well. In the afternoon a group of us including Cliff Hunter of CFA (Computers for Africa) went to visit 4 schools to assess them for the possible donation of PCs. We first of all went to the Ministry of Education to see Mr Alpha who was not there but his boss Mrs Gongo accompanied us round the schools. Two of them fitted the criteria quite well having reasonable power supply and security. One the 'Prince of Wales College' already had a purpose built classroom with 10 computers but not as modern as the ones which we have. The dilemma will be whether to give better models to those who already have or to give to those who have none. Those who already have could of course pass their current ones on to another school. In the evening went to an excellent talk by Henry from Nigeria who discussed a few of his thoughts about how we ought to relate to the local people in West Africa. For example: '*Actions speak louder than words*', '*Teach a trade not give aid*', '*balance between creating dependency and giving alms*'. *The importance in the culture of who you know 'Man know Man!*' The importance of '*relationships*' rather than '*things*' to West African people.

Dec 3rd:

Did anaesthesia for orthopaedic surgery in OR 3 with Steve. We have a very strong Anaesthetic team with 4 UK based Consultant anaesthetists on board. Steve from Glasgow, John from Warwick, Alex from Hull and myself from Basingstoke. We anaesthetised two small children with clubbed feet (age 2 and 3) I provided intra and post -op analgesia for both with a caudal block with Marcain (local anaesthetic) and clonidine (3u/kg) – this was recommended by John. It worked really well.

One of the children developed quite a high temperature which John says is associated with the tourniquet used to provide a bloodless field. One always learns something new from colleagues on the *Anastasis!* Did pre-op visit on lady with massive jaw tumour for surgery tomorrow. Needs fibre-optic intubation but none of the 4 of us regularly use this technique.

I did do several in Togo in March this year. The BBC are going to film some of the operation; they in fact have visited this lady at her home last W/E.

Dec 4th:

Fibre-optic intubation by myself went really well. We sprayed her nose and mouth with lots of local anaesthetic and also performed crico-thyroid and bi-lateral superior laryngeal blocks. She was then lightly sedated with small doses of ketamine, midazolam and morphine. The new Pentax fibroscope is great as it has batteries in the handle. The tube went in fine with no coughing. Luckily I was not being filmed! The BBC came in when the patient was draped and ready for surgery. 'Tash' the presenter was nervous but did well and in fact very nobly donated a pint of her own blood as she was the same 'group' as Kariatu the 30-year-old patient! Surgery went very well and the end result of surgeons Tony Giles and Chris Hunter's work looked impressive.

Dec 5th: JOURNEY HOME

After a final morning list of paediatric club feet repair, I waved goodbye to Tash the BBC presenter (she was filmed leaving the Ship several times!). We were taken by Zodiac powerboat from the *Anastasis*, 15 minutes across the bay, to a landing point where taxis took us to Lungi Airport. On the other side I met James Keita who had had his left arm skin grafted and released from his chest on the *Anastasis* two years previously. The expert plastic surgeon was Tertius Venter from RSA. James had spent 3 months on the Ship.

The result was a testimony to Tertius's skill – James had a full range of movement of his left shoulder and was now working as a lorry driver. The original scarring was caused by an exploding Kerosene lamp. Check in at Freetown Airport was fairly chaotic. No computerisation, boarding cards written by hand (3 people were put in Seat 15E in front of us!). Lots of baggage checks but the Mercy Ships identity badge seemed to make any search perfunctory! Arrived at Gatwick Airport at a time of 0550hrs to a slight difference in air temperature but also both tired and elated after another remarkable African Adventure.

Dec 17th:

Freetown seems a long way away; 'normality' is pervading ones existence. I am even adjusting to the cold weather (-3 deg. C this morning), a dramatic change from the Equator. 'Reverse culture shock' is also fading. This is coping with the dramatic contrast between the abundance of everything in the pre-Christmas shops and supermarkets of a major Western consumer based society and living in the poorest country in the World where the annual *per capita* income is a similar amount to that spent on a meal for two in London. Somehow the true meaning and story of that first Christmas seems to be lost in our increasingly hedonistic and self indulgent culture.

VISIT – WWW.AFRICANSMILES.COM –
the website that chronicles the story so far . . .

Sods Laws of Anaesthesia

*an occasional series from material submitted by Bob Chapman in Norfolk
– in fond memory of Dr Philip Keep*

Elastoplast and Mefix dressings stick to themselves, better than any that God is yet to produce.

The theory of canulation is the insertion of a small tube, inside a larger one, in practice though; it can often seem the other way around.

A vaporiser '**keyed filler**' will only fit one vapouriser, but if you are in a hurry, it won't fit that one either.

Syringe racks are designed to dispense one syringe at a time, or if you are in a hurry, the lot!

The drug for dilution most likely to spray back on you, whilst being drawn up, is Cefuroxime, because it smells the worst.

Sterile rubber gloves are designed to protect the wearer's hands, whilst completely removing any sense of touch, or manual dexterity, that they might have had.

Laparoscopic surgery can be likened to servicing your car, with the bonnet down, using someone else's tools.

An ability to work and talk at the same time is not one fully developed in all surgeons.

Most hand scrub dispensers are designed to provide a jet of soap, towards you and away from the hands.

Some surgeons think that time between cases is wasted, some anaesthetists, think that the reverse is true.

The person you most wish to see, is liable to be the most difficult to find.

Equipment only fails when you want to use it, not whilst it is sitting on the shelf and no matter how many times, it has been tested.

